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**Young people making 'choices' about physical activity:
Taking a necessary biographical approach**

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Tena koutou tena koutou tena tatou katoa

It is a great privilege to have been invited to deliver the lecture today in honour of José María Cagigal, the founding father of AIESEP. I trust that my presentation will do honour to his name and hope that he would have found what I have to say today to be in sympathy with his humanist philosophy. I thank the Board of AIESEP for choosing me for this great responsibility and I thank the Conference convenors for their hospitality and support.

Introduction

In the literature on young people's health and participation in physical activity, there are recurring narratives that lament the decline in participation during the senior years of schooling and beyond (e.g. Sallis, Prochaska and Taylor 2000). This apparent decline has been interpreted as a significant problem and one that has been addressed by strategies designed to induce young people to engage in more physical activity. This participation research has considerable persuasive power. It draws on quantitative studies that portray a simple relationship between age, gender and physical activity participation and sometimes between social determinants such as ethnicity and social class. However in a political context where the focus is on individual responsibility for health, the structural constraints on participation are often ignored. The economic and cultural circumstances that make some choices more possible for some children, young people and their families and less possible for others are less often taken into account. I would argue that this is in part because we see so little of these circumstances in the research; they remain invisible and so easily ignored.

In this presentation I want to address this absence by making visible something of the lives of young people and how this impacts the 'choices' they can make about physical activity. My argument will be that qualitative research, and in the case of this presentation biographies or life histories, can provide a more nuanced understanding of how the social, economic and cultural environments in which young people live, shape the choices they *do* make and *can* make in relation to physical activity. I will do this by drawing on work from a longitudinal study, the 'Life Activity Project', which investigated the place and meaning of physical activity in young people's lives. The project was funded by the Australian Research

Council over a period of six years. But before I say more about this research I need to do little auto-biographical work to illustrate my own positionality as a researcher.

My positionality: a short autobiography

I run a risk here. From the perspective of some paradigms by explaining my position, I could be seen as merely revealing my bias, and so disqualify myself from research in the very areas in which I work. For me, however, like most others writing and researching from a constructivist or poststructuralist position, all research is influenced by the researcher's particular ways of seeing the world and their investments in that position. The very choice of topic, the choice of research questions, methodology, theory, and choices of modes of interpretation and explanation are always influenced by the vested position of the researcher. I would argue that there is no neutral position and I take some reflection on one's positionality and investments to be a criterion for any good research and researcher, and so I do a little of this in what follows.

I take the way I approach my research to be influenced by my own history, experiences, by my gender, social class position, ethnicity and embodiment. My choice of research and my orientation to that research is also profoundly impacted by my experiences in relation to physical activity.

Firstly, I would argue that my research has been fundamentally influenced by my being a girl and then a woman, in a field where masculine values around sport and physical activity dominate. This was certainly not so evident in my early years or even in school. In a working class family of three girls, my father taught us to swim and then coached us, until we needed more professional advice. Both my parents were active in our local swimming club and, for me, swimming was an important part of my social life as child and young teenager. In winter I, with my two sisters, played netball and again it was a family affair – we might have had training once a week and while the competition was taken very seriously, it was very low key compared to training expectations today.

The physicality of movement has always been important to me, but also the feelings of success gained through competition – I have to confess to actually being very competitive. I think this is one of the reasons I now avoid formal competition whenever I can. I did well at sport in my school years. In the district I was one of the top swimmers and I played A grade netball and represented my selective girls' school in netball by the time I was 15. I also belonged to a local gymnastics club, where our Austrian teacher, emphasized the aesthetics of movement rather than strength or 'tricks'? When spending time at the beach with my friends became more important I gave up competitive swimming, just in time for my love of swimming to endure and to become very much part of my embodied identity. I loved dancing socially and was aware that I was good at it. I also have to admit to liking the attention it attracted.

All of these sports and activities were relatively inexpensive, certainly compared to these days, and little burden on my working class parents, for whom these were also an important part of their social life – the swimming club went on picnics in winter and travelled away to interclub meets every other Sunday. At my selective girls' school, while I was very much aware of my working class background, I had little sense of gender issues. I participated in a female sport, netball, and competed against other girls in swimming. None of these experiences provoked any sense of inequality or unfairness, though my mother impressed on me my differences from my middle class friends.

At university as a HPE undergraduate, I was one of the two students in my year who was interested in dance. I loved dance and dance improvisation. I did extra classes outside university in modern, African, Jazz and improvisation. I was fortunate to have a lecturer who was committed to educational gymnastics and creative dance and for some reason this approach to movement resonated with me. I also played university basketball and this became the source of most of my social life. Despite the activity of feminists at the time (the late 1960s), my PE and even my English studies never exposed me to feminist thinking or activities. I did, however, come out of my undergraduate studies with a strong commitment to movement education and creative dance, a marginal position in a field where sport was the mainstream form of physical education.

During my university years and throughout my life, like so many women I have lived with the usual demons around body size and food. While this did not emerge as an eating disorder, it sensitized me and continues to be important in shaping my subjectivity, and hence the way I approach research around food and weight, for example, and perhaps explains the dominance of these topics in my work.

However, it really wasn't until I took up a position as a lecturer in HPE program that my sensitivities to marginalization, were significantly sharpened. I was definitely the odd one out, I was more into dance and educational gymnastics than sports and I began teaching a sociology of sport subject, a subject not regarded as terribly useful by staff or students. I also completed my masters in education with a number of subjects in the sociology of education. I was the 'hippy' on staff, because of the way I dressed and because I questioned some of the certainties about sport and health that were taken for granted by my colleagues and most of my students in the program. My private file commented on my difference from the rest of the staff. Witnessing how students, who were seen as different because of their sexuality or their different views from the mainstream, were marginalized also honed my 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills 1959)

However, it still wasn't until I began my PhD that I began seriously reading in the areas of feminism and social theory, particularly poststructuralism and semiotics. This introduced me to writers who helped me understand my world/my history. They resonated both with my own experiences and made so much sense in relation to the areas I was interested in examining as a researcher and scholar. These theories have continued to shape my research

– raising questions about power and social relations and about the nature of truth and its effects. As a sociologist, while it might not always a popular position, especially with students, I enjoy challenging the taken-for-granted of everyday life and particularly making sense of the relationship between the personal and the social. More particularly for the research discussed in this presentation, I am interested in questioning what is so often taken for granted about the place and meaning physical activity *should* and *can* have in people's lives.

The dominant and constantly reiterated position is that physical activity is primarily about improving health and preventing obesity or fitness; that it is the responsibility of every person to be active to the prescribed amount and the responsibility of health professionals parents and teachers to ensure that this happens. I would argue that such a position ignores the particularities of people's lives and the structural constraints that shape both *the desire* and *the capability* to be physically active as well as limiting the opportunities to engage in physical activity.

The Life Activity Project allowed me to explore this absence through listening to young people talk about their lives and specifically the place and meaning of physical activity in those lives.

The LAP Project

The LAP project began as a three year project, four years in NSW because of some seed funding. Further funding from the Australian Research Council allowed Doune Macdonald and myself to extend the project for another three years and to include groups of young people who in the first four years we had been unable to reach. This also meant that we could follow our participants beyond school. In some cases in NSW we were able to follow participants over 7 years – from 13-21yrs or 16-24yrs. The main project then covered the period 2001-2006; relatively unique I would argue for a qualitative project in the area of health and physical activity, certainly in Australia.

The project began with a survey of young people in their initial and third year of secondary schooling in 8 schools across the three Eastern states of Australia. From these surveys we recruited 54 young people, aged between 12 and 16 years. In the first year of the qualitative component of the study the students were involved in an intensive interview schedule which allowed us to explore their meanings of physical activity, the body and sport. This was followed by one or two interviews in the remaining five years of the project. Over the 6-7 years of the project we were able to follow their engagement in physical activity in relation to changes in location, income, friendships, family structures and the demands of study and work.

Among other forms of data analysis, the longitudinal nature of the project lent itself to the construction of biographical stories from these interviews. It is these stories that will be used in the presentation to argue that 'choices' about physical activity (like other choices made in

life) are made in the context of complex social, cultural and geographical environments. The data from the project and others that have followed this model have been published in a number of individual papers and chapters but the best representation of the project as a whole is captured in the Book: *Young People, Physical Activity and the Everyday* (Wright and Macdonald 2010).

A word on biographies as research

Biographical research 'starts from and focuses on the personal and subjective experiences of individual people' (Sikes 2006). From a poststructuralist perspective, biographies or life histories are understood to be produced in relation to changing material and discursive circumstances (what is important and what people know and believe). This applies to both the story that is told – i.e. a life history or biography tells us about the historical and social circumstances in which the life was lived: 'A story about the self is also a story about *the world surrounding the self*' (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003: 6). And the circumstances in which the story is told – how the teller is now positioned (for example, as a young adult looking back on their childhood).

It also depends on the relationship between the interviewer and storyteller. For example the LAP biographies tell us much about the social circumstances which shaped the young people's physical identities or physical habitus; but what they can tell us depends on what memories are important to them at the time of the interview, the kinds of questions they are asked and what is prompted by the interviewer. Stories are thus always partial, shaped by researchers' interests and questions and by what the participant remembers and seeks to highlight. The value of biographies is this very contingency on circumstances. Through different biographies, we can come to understand the social world from many and different points of view. It connects the personal with the public; it allows us to make connections between individuals, culture and social structures.

For this reason it seems that biographical research often focuses on people who do not have a great deal of power. Fiona Dowling (2012), for example, suggests that biographies or life histories can provide insights, a window into the lives of marginalized people. In this presentation I hope that the biographies will provide opportunity for reflection and for asking how young people's social, geographical and cultural locations impact on their opportunities and choices in relation to physical activity.

A word on neoliberalism and 'choice'

Neoliberalism is a word that has been used to understand social policy shifts with an emphasis on the free market, individual autonomy, competition, together with an increased surveillance of private lives. Neoliberal rationality calls upon the individual to (Petersen & Bunton, 1997) (Petersen 1997: 196). This translates into an expectation that individuals will be responsible for making their own lives, while at the same time being accountable for the success of those lives, to the state. And so we constantly hear arguments that individuals should be more physically active to avoid obesity because their failure to do so is an

economic cost to the government/public. In a society influenced by neoliberal values, individuals and their behavior is also constantly open to surveillance (for the public good) – from the surveillance cameras in streets to the inspection of school lunch boxes and the measuring of children’s BMIs.

Young people living in societies influenced by the political and economic culture of neo-liberalism, have had to come to understand themselves as able to make their own futures and as responsible for the choices they make in this process. As Steven et al. (2000) found, and as we found in our research (see Wright and Laverty 2010), young people do see themselves as being in charge of their own destinies no matter what their life circumstances. Young people do believe they have choices, that luck, hard work and sheer determination are the bases of “success”. This is an idea to keep in mind when listening to the stories of the young people in the LAP project. Are hard work and sheer determination equally rewarded? And how does this impact the choices they have in relation to physical activity?

When individuals are willing to take responsibility, to believe they are solely responsible and believe others are solely responsible for their life circumstances, their successes and their failures to succeed, it means that governments can avoid taking responsibility for the structural elements that shape choices, including those associated with physical activity. Individuals can be blamed for their failure to be active and to be healthy, with no account of their social or economic circumstances, or even their desire to focus on other things.

Contingencies and possibilities

As mentioned earlier one of the values of biographies is the way they work as windows into the lives of others, many of whom are not like ourselves. As you listen to these stories, there is another dimension of truth construction. Each of you will listen and interpret these stories differently, your interpretations will depend on your own ‘biographies’, your own experiences, and investment in particular ways of thinking and being. I present these stories as an opportunity to understand rather than judge the lives of others, and to perhaps ponder what it would take to provide these young people with opportunities, resources that would fit with their lives and meet their needs as they are.

As I tell these stories I would like you to consider the following question: in what ways are the ‘choices’ in relation to physical activity made by the young people contingent on their early experiences of physical activity and their social, cultural, economic and, in our case, geographical environments?

It is likely that you will find that none of these experiences or environments act singly but in interaction with one another, some work multiply to limit choices and others to enhance possibilities.

Kim: The ideal physically active citizen

Students from two elite private/independent schools were recruited for the study – one boys' school and one girls' school. The contrast between these schools and the other schools in the study was huge. Both schools had up to date sports complexes including 50 metre swimming pools, gyms, tennis courts, ovals and so on. The girls' school offered a wide range of sports including: rowing, netball, waterpolo, tennis, martial arts, hockey and basketball. There was an even wider range at the boys' school including: Australian Rules football, cricket, mountain bike racing, rowing, volleyball. Both schools employed paid coaches and it was more or less mandatory that students would participate in at least one form of organized physical activity, most of which happened on Saturdays, not during the school week. At these schools physical activity, particularly sport was understood as a taken-for-granted part of everyday life, a necessary attribute for the well-balanced citizen; it provided the students with considerable cultural and social capital. For the young men sport was also part of their masculine identity, their physicality and their training as leaders of society.

For those who subscribed to this ethos, physical activity became integral to the way they lived their lives – for the young men and women we interviewed, with the exception of one young woman whose love was music, they found it hard to imagine not being active in some way, at and beyond school.

Kim was among the cohort of female students we interviewed from the elite private girls school. Her family was not particularly affluent but both parents worked long hours to ensure that their daughter had, from their point of view, the best possible education. She had attended the private school through her primary as well as her high school years. From her very early years Kim played t-ball, netball and cricket. Throughout her interviews her love and passion for sport comes through; she makes it clear that it is for sport rather than physical activity as exercise – she loves the competition and the social aspects of play.

In high school waterpolo becomes Kim's passion. She can't imagine missing a game – she talks about it as a necessary balance to other parts of her life and a way of building social contacts.

So that was the push [at school], that if you do it you are going to get to know, like you've got 150 in the grade, you are not going to know every body. So if you do sport you are going to get a lot more contacts. But I do it because I love it. I love the competition. I love the whole thing about it. Yeah, it's not because of physical, like to keep me physical active, I think that if sport didn't keep me physically active, no if sport didn't have the factors that I like about it than I wouldn't do it. (2000)

When she finished school, Kim took a gap year in Europe while she worked out what course she wanted to do at University. When she returned she enrolled in a double degree, as well as being involved in a number of extra curricular activities such as the United Nations Society. Like many of the young people from the private schools, working out how to

continue with sport beyond school was something of a challenge. Sport had always been organised by their schools. However, for Kim, sport had become part of her identity, her embodied subjectivity, it was visceral. She needed to find a way of expressing this within the context of her busy university life. The answer was to join a university team.

For a short time she played with the university waterpolo team, but their training schedule clashed with her other commitments. At the time of her last interview she was playing competitive Frisbee.

Yeah, I play or train Frisbee three to four times a week. So that is the Frisbee on Thursday nights, which I was doing when I last talked to you; I was training Thursday nights for two hours. That has now increased because as I mentioned to you when this wasn't recording, the Eastern University Games are coming up, held in Coffs Harbour in July. So we train Sunday for that for two hours and Monday night which is tonight I'll play a game which is the divisional competition. ... I play in that and hopefully I should be getting around to some fitness training run by the University as well; and that is really good because I love my sport but it's a very good balance just getting out, to know that I may be dying under these sets of books but in two hours I'll be on the Frisbee field and they are great people and it's a great sport, you just don't think about work. (2005)

After university Kim took a UN internship in Geneva. In an email interview in 2007, she remarks that her work schedule there, while exciting, had impacted on her physical and mental health. She described her involvement in physical activity as less diverse over time, especially after school when there were less sporting opportunities available and organized for her. She now had to seek out opportunities for team sports; they were not part of her daily life as they had been at school. At University the Frisbee club met this need, but there were no such opportunities in Geneva.

Angela: Ethnicity, gender and capacity

The second story goes to the heart of the matter of how early experiences shape the way a child approaches later ones; how 'physical activity identities' (Wright and Lavery 2010) that do not include the capacity to and experience of being a skilled or competent mover in the early years shape the confidence and capacities of children throughout their schooling and beyond school (see also (Wright & Burrows, 2006).

Angela migrated from Fiji with her Fijian Indian parents in 1996, at the age of about 11 years. In Fiji formalized physical activity was not part of her experience in or out of school. Angela thus found herself ill prepared for physical education in an Australian primary school. Unfamiliar with the rules and with the games that were played in her senior primary classes, she avoided participating in physical education and physical activities. She continued to avoid participation in any form of organised physical activities throughout high school and for some time beyond school. In addition, not being able to swim shaped her experiences of

some iconic Australian experiences of the beach and pool (that is, her participation in the wider physical culture).

In year 10 at about 13 or 14 years, the interviewer asked: So you're not interested in anything [in PE]?

No. Because I was never interested in it from the start. If I was interested in it at the beginning; like in primary school, then maybe I would be interested in it now. But since my primary school we had the choice, like to do sport or sit there and so class work, and I chose to sit there and do class work, I just *never knew how to play. Like they never explained the rules and I just didn't know how to play* so I couldn't be bothered to try anyway. When we arrived in Australia, my brother was younger, like he learnt quicker, but for me, I was past my years. Like *I was already supposed to know how to play.* (2000)

We could say that her school physical education experiences have failed her. Her opportunities to develop the dispositions needed to participate in organize physical activity or even to find pleasure in physical activity were absent.

That is not the end of the story, however, Angela like many of the young people in our study was not unfamiliar with the 'gym'. When she wanted to lose weight to fit into her dress for the end of school formal, she spent some time in a commercial gym and later she also began to go to the gym with her fiancé and then husband. In 2005, at 21 she reflected back on her experience of school and compared it with how she uses the gym.

I think the difference is with the past [at school] there were instructions to follow, rules to follow and you had to keep up with other people's pace as a team. So basically I was a bad member of the team because I was letting everyone slow down. With the gym because I'm doing it individually and I'm doing it on my own and it's easier and that's probably why I enjoy it more, because I don't have anyone yelling at me that I am slowing someone down or I'm not doing this right, I'm not doing that right. So I think that's part of the reason I like it more. (2005)

Her husband was a regular gym attendee and so Angela joined his gym – 'it was good company to being doing it with him'

I used to love going to that gym. I mean even if I just spend one and a half hours on it, just going there and coming out I feel really, really good. It's like you feel refreshed, new or something like that, you know what I mean? So yeah I loved going there... I think as long as I've got someone there supporting me or pushing me [husband] I am more motivated to do something and I care more ... So I think other people or friends influence me more. (2005)

However, when Angela quit her job, money was short and they were unable to pay the gym fees. When they could afford the fees again, with one person on day shift and the other on night shift, and one car, attendance at the gym had to go again.

The expense of gym membership, whether commercial or local government owned, and their accessibility, was an issue for most of the less affluent young people once they left school. This is a form of physical activity that many of our participants found convenient and enjoyable and one which did not require previous formal movement skills.

This perhaps points to a valuable opportunity, for those interested in enhancing young people's participation, by making access to gyms more possible for those who would like to use them but find the costs prohibitive.

Sharon and Cassie: Gender, geography and social class

The next two stories provide the opportunity to reflect on how both geography – rurality in particular – and social class and gender (and also health issues) intersect in the lives of two young women to limit their possibilities for physical activity. One of the young women, Sharon, had been very active throughout school and had always enjoyed physical activity, the other, Cassie, had never enjoyed the physical activities available to her – her early experiences and choices limited by her severe asthma. Both Sharon and Cassie were first interviewed at their government school in a small rural town 60 kms from Brisbane CBD.

The families of both students lived on small properties outside the town. Both were very close to their families. Both Sharon and Cassie were in paid work from year 9 – this is a common theme across the interviews - and Cassie also spent a lot of time with her grandmother helping her and her friends.

Throughout her school years, Sharon was very involved in school and club sports – swimming, netball and later volleyball. Her mum who was involved in aerobics and various sports and used a treadmill at home, was an important influence on her attitude towards physical activity. In her last interview in 2006, Sharon had left school, and was working as a manager at the bottle shop in the local Pub, where she was responsible for paying the bills, and completing all of the paper work. She was working Tuesday through to Saturday, 50 hrs a week, a 12 hr working day. By Saturday night she described herself as exhausted, her ideal time out was to curl up in bed with a movie 'if I'm lucky'. She described her work as very physical – lifting boxes full of bottles and cans.

Sharon had started kickboxing at the local gym but her work roster changed so that she couldn't do that anymore. At the time of the last interview in 2006 as well as working at the bottle shop, she was studying to get into security work and eventually the Police Force – she envisioned being more active then as part of the training.

This quote in her last interview, says a lot about her life at the time of this last interview. She was asked what she would do if she had more time:

I would like to go to the beach; I'd like to not be so exhausted on my days off that I don't want to do anything. So I would actually be able to go and do some exercise and go swimming, go for a ride somewhere. Well I'm starting to do this now but I'd like to just drive to different places like Toowoomba and all of that and take photos and do some more photography. (2006)

While Sharon had been very much involved in school sport as a participant, Cassie, who suffered from severe asthma was less involved. She helped organize school carnivals and events but did not actively participate. She said she was unable to run because of her asthma. She would have liked to do more swimming but wasn't able to because no-one had ever taught her to swim. When her grandfather was alive she used to go on 10k walks with him.

At the time of her school interviews in 2001, Cassie was working at Vet Clinic and was certain that her future lay with Veterinary nursing. Even at this stage, however, she seemed to be struggling with schoolwork despite spending a lot of time doing homework. She spent all her holidays with her grandmother for whom she seemed to be the main support.

Five years later in 2006, Cassie had given up her job in childcare because of diagnosis of a brain tumor. While this turned out not to be as serious as first indicated, she no longer had her childcare position and was now working 6 days a week at a Brisbane hospital as a linen assistant. In response to a question about what affects her health, she pointed out that her work in the hospital was hard physical work, involving heavy lifting and loading and pushing; in other words she was letting the interviewer know that she was being active.

Cassie had to get up early to go to work, she walked to and from the train station, she got back relatively late at night from work, and at the end of the week and as she said she was 'buggered, I am absolutely buggered'. She was also organizing her wedding, and intended to live at her grandmothers when married. 'Maybe' she says hopefully at the end of the interview she 'won't have to work so hard when she is married and has children'.

For Cassie and Sharon 'choices' of physical activity were considerably constrained by their geographical and social class location – for example, their need to work long hours to be financially independent and the few local facilities for physical activity beyond team sports in their town. They were, however, making other choices that gave meaning to their lives – Cassie's care for her grandmother, building a relationship with her partner and planning her wedding were most important to her at the time; and for Sharon what mattered was making enough money to live reasonably and to be able to do what it takes to eventually join the police. These took priority over 'choices' that might involve the kinds of physical activity prescribed to benefit their health.

Felicia: gender, social class and culture

The last biography brings together elements of social class, gender and ethnicity. Felicia was first interviewed when she was in the second last year of her schooling at a government school in the western suburbs of Sydney. In contrast to the elite private schools, this school from the statements on its website saw itself as supporting the basic literacies of students and offering remedial support. Felicia's Nicaraguan family had a strong commitment to their culture, speaking Spanish at home, and attending cultural events including baseball and dancing.

Felicia loved to dance. At school she organized a dance group and also danced with her family at the local Spanish club. She was the u/16 school softball captain and with her friend had organized a girls' rugby team. She was chosen as house captain for her school swimming carnival and also competed in school athletics. After school, Felicia was often the main carer for her sister and brother, helping them with their homework and cooking dinner on most school nights. On Saturdays she attended Spanish language classes. In her last year of school, in 2001, she was studying hard to set herself up well for a job in tourism.

In 2002 Felicia was struggling. She was still living at home in a fairly strict environment. She was still with her Samoan boyfriend, whom she had been seeing in high school and who was still a secret from her family, especially her father. She was working behind the bar at a local social club, studying at TAFE and cleaning the family home. Softball and boxing had been given up because she no longer had the time or the energy.

By the 2004 interview Felicia had had a son with her Samoan boyfriend and moved in with his family. She was still looking forward to beginning a TAFE Hospitality and Management Diploma and looking for a house of their own to rent. Felicia's main concern re physical activity was getting back to her original size – she did a lot of walking and would have liked to have gone to the gym but life and other commitments got in the way.

By 2007 Felicia had four children – another boy in 2005 and twins in 2007. She had consolidated her role as a stay at home mother, focused on family life, shaping her priorities around meeting her children's needs. Although her partner worked two jobs, money was short. One of her aspirations was to move out of public housing to a house with a flat safe backyard for her children.

While I have partially chosen Felicia's biography to illustrate the intersection of social class, gender and culture, what is particularly different and interesting about Felicia is her, at least partial, rejection of neoliberal notions of individual responsibility. While, on one hand, she saw herself as responsible for her own health, when it came to her children she refused to take sole responsibility for social and structural aspects of her environment which shaped the choices available to her in relation to physical activity and 'healthy' eating. As she said in her last interview:

Well they come in saying they are going to snatch people's children away because they are obese. But you don't see them trying to help families out. They could help families and stuff; they could give some benefits to [to families] for transport. Single mothers get cheaper transport; they get concessions. They don't pay anything to the RTA for registering their car. ... But with health you don't see anything with health; you don't get a discount at the gym; you don't get a discount at the swimming pool. If you want to put your son in swim classes or your daughter in swim classes you don't get that discount.

It's like why is it different for everything else when everyone uses it. I guess like with groceries and stuff it would help out. The people who have money, have nice stuff, have nice clothes, have educated kids, upper class schools, they don't struggle whatsoever. And then you see families that have lower incomes, struggling, working, twice as much overtime and they still have barely enough to survive to put their kids into things like swimming classes, gymnastics and dance and art school. It's just not fair. People living in [urban fringe] compared to people living in the city get treated very differently, very differently. I think it's rude to be honest. (Felicia, 2007)

Conclusion

In conclusion I will return to the questions to reflect on the 'choice' available to these young people as evidenced by my constructions of their biographies.

- How are we to understand choice in the lives of these young people?
- What impacts the choices they can make?
- How do they understand the choices that they make in relation to their lives and physical activity?
- What would it take for these young people to be able to engage in the kinds of physical activities they would enjoy and want to be involved in?

I hope that I have convinced that the young people's 'choices' were highly contingent on their histories and circumstances. The desire and the capacity to participate were highly facilitated or constrained by factors that were related primarily, I would argue, to social class, to social and economic circumstances, and compounded by particular geographical locations, ethnicities and gender and the intersection of these.

Making the 'correct' choice to engage in the appropriate amount of physical activity per day is not simply a matter of knowing its benefits and having the right attitude. However the normative or prevailing position in government and social rhetoric seems to be that everybody should be physically active in the way and in the amount prescribed. Those who don't are blamed not only for not being active but for not *wanting* to be active, for lacking the disposition, the desire to be active.

The not so surprising thing is that all of the young people in our study would subscribe to this view – that participation is a matter of individual responsibility. They talked about their own lives as made by their own choices and decisions. With the exception of Felicia, all held themselves accountable for their ability or inability to participate in physical activity no matter how this was contingent on work and/or family commitments or income. In this sense they were all good neoliberal subjects – unlikely to challenge the prevailing point of view. Such a position allows governments to ignore their responsibilities in creating environments conducive to enjoyable physical activity. Instead we have piecemeal solutions which target individuals or groups perceived to be at risk, and in need of change.

I would argue that if we are to do young people a service rather than a disservice we need, rather than focusing on changing individual attitudes and behaviours, to direct our attention to communities, to planning for affordable, attractive and accessible facilities in low income areas, for parks and playgrounds, for free childcare for better school facilities and resources and so on.

We should also be arguing for physical education programmes in schools which foster ‘abilities’, rather than prescribed amounts of exercise time; programmes which develop the kind of competence which enables children and young people to engage in physical activities which are relevant to their lives and which develop a sense of embodiment which allows them to engage more competently with their world.

The purpose then of our research has been to contribute to knowledge so that policy and planning might take into account the complexities of young people’s lives, and offer an alternative to what Slee describes as [the] reductive urge towards universality and essentialism’ (Slee 2000: xi).

Coda

I have been using the word physical activity throughout this presentation and it is the word we use in the study. But in using the word ‘physical activity’ I find myself caught up in language here with which I feel uncomfortable – that is the use of the term ‘physical activity’ when it has taken on the meaning of ‘purposeful and useful exercise for health’. The very term suggests a position that participating in physical activity is a morally better choice

At the same time, working out my position on this presents a dilemma for me. On one hand I want other people to enjoy physical activity because particular forms of physical activity have shaped my own embodied identity/my physicality in ways that I am proud of and I think help me enjoy life. I love swimming, dancing, yoga and walking along the beach and I probably do some of that because I have to maintain a body shape that I am happy with – the demons never really go away. I recognize, however, that enjoying movement and the physicality of moving might be the case for everyone – their experiences, opportunities and bodies may not make this possible.

I do not feel comfortable with visiting my own ideas of what is good and valuable on to others, just because I love being physical, doesn't mean everyone else has to. Nor can I subscribe to a position that it is everyone's responsibility to be active. Rather I have come to a position both from my own experience and as a physical educator and researcher that it is the 'right' of every person to have the opportunity to develop the embodied capacity to engage in some forms of movement as a source of pleasure and as part of their sense of self and way or relating to the world.

From another, social justice, perspective it is also the right of every child and young person to build the physical capital that for the privileged elite is recognized as a source of social and cultural capital in order to not only enhance their pleasure in movement but to enhance their opportunities in society more general – their access to the goods of society – to higher education and to better paying jobs and so on.

For these reasons I think it worth ensuring that all children and young people have both the embodied competencies and the opportunities and access to resources etc so that they can engage in the forms of physical activity which they enjoy and give them satisfaction.

whakawhetai hoki whakarongo

Thank you for listening

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